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In Vino Veritas

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When I was halfway through eighth grade, my parents and I went on a cruise around Christmas break, taking along my cousin Sarah, my mother's blood niece who my father never quite knew what to say to. He would, unwittingly, talk to her like she was a little younger than she actually was, trying his best to keep everything friendly. After telling an age-old joke, asking if she got it, and how her food was, or if school was going well, the conversation would pretty much end.

Before meeting for dinner in the main dining room each night, my father would sit at the bar over a couple of glasses of Grey Goose, popping peanuts into his mouth while waiting for me and the girls. As the leathery, dinosaur-aged lounge pianist butchered Broadway showtunes, guzzling down glasses of vodka balanced atop her instrument and reminiscing about her dead ex-husbands, my father talked with the bartender, a chubby Philippine master of origami. Eventually, the bartender would pour my father a Grey Goose immediately as he sat down, knowing his drink better than anybody. The meals weren't bad, nor were they terribly good either, and the menu's descriptions of the entrees always swam in overly flattering adjectives like "a succulent, mouthwatering potato puree, roasted fennel and mint vinaigrette, a dash of Merlot, porcini mushrooms in a duck sauce, and just a touch of saffron," which was used to describe the chicken. This was to make Americans feel sophisticated, my father explained.

"It's bullshit," he said, letting me in on a little secret, about when restaurants would serve a raspberry sorbet to cleanse the palate before the meal, as this one did.

Each person we saw there, we saw again and again and nicknamed them. One guy at the table right beside us, who always sat there with his relatively normal-looking family, had a mullet and skin like Willem Dafoe. We called him "Mullet Man." Earlier in the trip, a woman around my parents' age, who had a thick Long Island accent and a titanic 12-carat diamond ring on her finger, stood next to my father in the cafeteria line at breakfast. She took one of the bagels from the counter in front of her. Then, in a second, she turned her head, and it suddenly disappeared.

"Who took my bagel? Who took my bagel? *Where is it?* Where's my bagel? Did you take it?" she screamed, turning to my father. "I want my bagel back!"

The woman freaked out, when she could've gotten another. The poor Filipina girl at the counter began to cry, embarrassed by how she had talked to her. But the woman got her bagel and just moved along in the line, without even so much as an apology. My father looked at the girl with

utter shame, glancing at her with the eyes of an old dog. Without a word, he had to tell her he was sorry, feeling somehow it was his responsibility.

One afternoon, my mother and Sarah lay on their backs on the ship's deck chairs in their bathing suits. The chairs circled all around the sixth deck, beautiful, mahogany chairs that had never been used before. My mother read *Into Thin Air* by John Krakauer, as Sarah chewed gum, listened to an Avril Lavigne CD on her headphones, and read the latest issue of *Teen People*.

"God, I love these chairs," my mother said.

"Oh my God, seriously, I could honestly sit, like, all day in these," Sarah said. "Hey, Wendy, is it okay if we grab some lunch? I'm starving." My mother smiled at her, even though she always tried correcting Sarah on calling her "aunt," not just Wendy.

"Let's go," my mother said.

The two of them got up from their chairs and walked over to the outdoor pools, where the bar and grill was located. My mother and Sarah stood at the bar, waiting for the bartender, a twenty-something girl from somewhere in Eastern Europe, to finish taking the orders of two cruisers in front of them.

The woman ahead got her order and walked off, when the bartender smiled at the customer who was next in line and said, "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

The customer ahead was a heavy, bearded fifty-something-year-old man with a gold Rolex and a *Chai* chain around his neck, a necklace practically outsizing the liner herself. The customer stood in front of my mother and Sarah, glaring at the bartender.

"You saw me, you saw me, and you didn't even take my order. You knew goddamn well that I was waiting. You give me service like that again, and I'll report your ass. You understand me?" he said, sticking his index finger out at her.

The customer walked away, not even putting down an order. The bartender looked at Sarah and my mother.

"Can you believe that guy?" my mother said to the bartender. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. ... I just don't know what was with him," the bartender said.

That night, my mother and Sarah told my father and me over dinner. "... I mean, that's how people become anti-Semitic," my mother said.

On some nights, Sarah and I went to play board games and swig free Cokes at the ship's Teen Club, where I barely said anything to anyone. One night, Sarah and I were playing a game of cards with some of the girls. One of the girls, who was around Sarah's age, was bonier than a freshly-caught

piece of sable with a mushy nose and a huge blonde wig out of the sixties. My mother and Sarah had noticed her around the ship before. Poor kid was probably in chemo.

"I don't know. She kinda looks like a Make-a-Wish girl," my mother said, whispering to Sarah, trying to solve the puzzle of the girl's sickly appearance.

Playing cards that night, Sarah was sitting next to me, quietly guiding me through the game. I missed several of my turns, thinking about the strange, sensational disturbance in my pants, and accidentally revealed my cards.

"Wait. I put this one out?" I asked, sliding a card out of my pile.

"No, Eddie, it's not your turn," Sarah said.

"Oh, right, sorry about that," I said.

The Make-a-Wish girl rolled her eyes at me and said, "*Do you even know* how to play this game, it's so *easy*..."

"I mean, kind of," I said, blushing.

"Cause it really doesn't look like you do," she said.

"Well, it's not like I'm that good or anything," I said.

"I can tell," she said.

The four of us always went to the earlier dinner, before the show each night. On one of the first nights, before we were forced to sit through an hour and a half of a Clay Aiken wannabe lipsynching "I'm Comin' Home ... Ireland," which was a cruise original played against a video montage that made it look like an ad for American Airlines, and a horrible rendition of "Up Where We Belong," the captain came onstage with a microphone in his hand, and welcomed us onto his ship. Speaking with the heavy accent of his native Greece, the captain stood high on the stage at six foot three, with slicked black hair and a tiny birthmark on the right side of his cheek. My father explained to me that many ship captains were Greeks, because of their knowledge of the sea.

"Thank you, my friends, for being here to sail the sea with us tonight," he said, minutes before introducing his entire staff.

As the adults in the theatre sipped on alcoholic beverages, I fidgeted in my seat and drank a glass of Sprite, as my parents had specifically interrupted my order to remind me not to have Diet Coke so late in the evening. The captain lifted up a glass of champagne, toasting in every language, beginning with his own.

"*L'chaim*," the captain said. My parents were the loudest to repeat the toast in Greek.

But one night, something happened. There was a big, drunken family at the dining room's later seating, laughing hysterically and yelling, and blowing balloons that were landing on people's tables. Nobody really said anything, though. After all, they didn't want to get involved.

"Oh, Bob, *please*, just let it go," a woman told her husband.

Their kids were there with them. And they just wanted to eat their dinners. Then, a dead balloon fell on the father's plate, right as he was about to take a bite. The father put his fork down. He leaned back in his chair, sighing. Another fell onto his daughter's. Someone threw it, unwittingly.

"No. No way. That's enough," he said, getting up from his chair.

The father, a small, suited man from New York, went over to the family's table. They were howling at some joke, when he interrupted them.

He tapped a man seated on the shoulder, probably another father, and said "Listen, sorry to bother your dinner there, but you know, I just got a balloon over on my plate, and my wife and I were just wondering, you know, if you'd maybe ..."

The blonde-haired man, who already had a tan, sneered with a mocking smile. "Yeah, what?" he asked.

"... Listen, I don't want any trouble, but people here paid good money for this food," he said.

Then, the man stood up. He got up in the father's face, slurring his words.

"So, that's what you're concerned about now, is it? Money? Hell, don't surprise me one bit," the man said.

"Excuse me?" the father asked, a little surprised.

"You can't tell me what to do, you fuckin' kike," he said.

He pushed the father, who got in his face, as the other dinner guests looked on with astonishment. Some of the other husbands tried to hold them back, and busboys came running in. The father pushed him against the table. The man punched him, bringing the father to the floor, when suddenly, the head of security and one of his boys arrived, breaking them apart.

"What the *hell* is going on *here*?" the head of security said, a very faint accent in his voice.

"Why don't you ask this guy?" the father said about the man, picking himself up from the floor.

"Joe, will you get me some goddamn backup over here," the head of security yelled into the walkie-talkie he was holding. He snapped his fingers at the guard, flashing him a knowing look.

"Sir, please, I can explain . . .," the father began.

"*I don't wanna hear it*," the head of security barked.

"This guy's been harassin' me and my family," the man said.

"That's a goddamn lie, asshole, and you know it," the father said.

"*Liar? Liar?* Don't you *ever* call me that again, you goddamn kike! You *hear me? That's all you people ever do*," the man said.

"Sir, I'm not gonna ask you again," the security chief said, trying to get him under control, and not hearing what he was saying.

"That's how it was then with you Jews, and that's how it's *always gonna be*," the man said to the father, spit hurling from his mouth.

At that second, the head of security stopped. "What did you just say, sir?"

"He heard me," the man said, angrily.

"My father *died* in Yom Kippur, sir," he said. "Why don't we have a little chat in the captain's office, shall we? I can tell you all about it."

The head of security smirked, grabbing the man's arm. He turned out to be an ex-agent for the Mossad.

After that night, both of the families ended up apologizing, although the drunken family just apologized to the captain, the dining room staff, and the head of security. No one knew if they ever apologized to the Jewish family, though. They probably did, reluctantly. It wasn't enough. They were banned from eating in the dining room, and for the remainder of their stay, they were forced to spend the rest of their evenings ordering room service from their staterooms.

A few days later, our cruise reached its final night, where the entire waiting staff served flaming baked Alaskas and gathered around the dining room to sing in off-key broken English to say goodbye. As I dug into my first baked Alaska, the dinner guests clapped with screaming applause. I looked up from my plate, and clapped my hand against the napkin in my other hand seconds into the applause.

That night, long after the midnight buffet had closed, I was rolling around in bed, struggling to fall asleep. Thunderous rap music blasted from the deck above, and I lay awake, wondering why they were being so loud.

As New Year's Eve was just days away, a snowstorm hit New York, canceling all flights heading into JFK and LaGuardia. Half of the families on our ship flying out of San Juan would be stuck at the Miami airport until the storm cleared up northeast. Giant suitcases were parked outside the cabins on our floor. Sarah and I woke up, got out of beds, and raced downstairs to meet my parents for breakfast in the cafeteria, leaving our packed bags in the bedroom. My parents sat at one of the tables. Reading the newspaper, my father was eating a plate of corned beef hash, egg whites, and a bagel.

"This doesn't look good," my father said, studying the paper.

"Yeah, but thank God we didn't get it. I mean, four hours at Miami? What a nightmare," my mother said, seeing the two of us walk over. "Hey, you guys, how'd you sleep?"

"I don't know, okay, I guess," I said, still half-asleep and fiddling with the dried-up gunk around my eyes. "Come on, Sarah, let's get some food."

Sarah and I got up to get our breakfast. Resting my tray at one of the stations, I looked around the cafeteria. Every family looked so happy. A

new mother was feeding her baby a spoonful of food. She'd probably never been on a trip like this one before, never to forget it. I smiled, when a voice appeared over the loudspeaker. The voice was the captain's.

"My friends, I regret to inform you, that somebody last night, threw the deck chairs off," the captain said. "They're all gone."

He sounded like he was about ready to cry. Many of the passengers just fell in silence, covering their mouths. No one could believe somebody could do something like that.

"All that work, all that money ... totally gone to waste," my mother said, turning to my father.

An old man in sunglasses and an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt was sitting with his wife at the table next to us and just looked at my father, unable to believe it.

"Ya know? I've been alive for seventy-five years, and I ain't never seen anything like this in my life. What the hell kinda person would do something like that?" he said.

Turns out a couple of kids got drunk and threw the chairs into the ocean the night before.

"You know, some fisherman could have been out there," the old man said.

My father nodded back at him, thinking how those chairs were ever going to be replaced. He couldn't help but wonder why it couldn't have been some of the passengers instead.

Unfortunately, they just weren't drunk enough.